

# Communicating in the Workplace

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## *Administrative Accounting and Bookkeeping Program*

### Handout: Overcoming Barriers to Effective Communications

#### Attitude

As we saw in the previous reading, communicating with another human is a complex, multistep process. Fortunately, there are practical steps you can take to become a better communicator. These begin with attitude:

- **Recognize that communicating well is a skill:** becoming conscious of how much effort and skill it takes to communicate effectively is the necessary first step toward putting in the effort to learn and develop true expertise. Very few of us are as good at communicating as we think.
- **Be Audience Oriented:** the next most important thing you can do is become more audience oriented. That is, when you're communicating with a person or group, put yourself in their shoes. What prior knowledge do they bring? What are their needs, and what are they looking to gain from the conversation? Are they receptive to your message, or smarting from a bad previous experience you need to address? Having the empathy to understand your audience's perspective makes a huge difference in your ability to craft a message they'll find meaningful and persuasive.

#### Physical Barriers

When you understand the complexity of the communication process, the importance of removing or, at least, minimizing physical barriers becomes obvious. When you have the right attitude (as above) that you take control of the things you can control. That begins with:

- **Choose an appropriate channel:** Different communication channels are better suited to different types of messages:

- **Face-to-face** is best for any sort of discussion that involves back and forth messages to work through a problem or reach a conclusion when a decision needs to be made;
- **Email** is best for relatively formal messages for which there needs to be a written record (unfortunately, its ease of use leads it to be over-used for routine messages; more on that later!);
- **Telephone** is best for brief messages such as to confirm or check details; and
- **Text** similarly is best for quick confirmation messages.
- **Group presentation** for messages to a part or all of your staff that need particular emphasis.
- **Reducing physical barriers to communication:** if something is getting in the way of your successfully getting your message across, don't just stand there—take action: move closer if the room is too noisy; speak slowly and use clear, simple language when speaking with a receiver from a different language, and so on.

## Active Listening

After audience focus, the next most important thing you can do to strengthen your communications skills, ironically, is to listen. Remember that in the communication cycle diagrammed in Unit 1, even the original sender is listening to feedback from the receiver. And very few of us are as good at listening as we think.

🗨️ *An Anecdote: I consider myself an effective and articulate communicator but, when deep in a 'spirited' conversation with a good friend recently, I had a humbling experience. He suddenly stopped in mid-sentence and said: "You're not listening to me. You're just looking at me so you can see when my lips stop moving, and you can make your own point". It was true! (And, for someone who teaches communications, deeply embarrassing.) Be honest with yourself; how often, when the other person is speaking, are you really thinking about your next statement rather than listening to them?*

The opposite of this is "active listening". And the key word here is active. When the other person is speaking, you give them your full focus and attention. Rather than preparing your response, you are using any mental overhead to process and summarize what they are saying—essentially putting it into your own words and context. Here are a few tips to be a more active listener:

- Stop talking!
- Be patient and let the speaker finish; don't interrupt.
- Resist distractions and control your surroundings if anything is interfering with your ability to hear and understand the other person.
- Establish a receptive mindset and keep an open mind.
- Capitalize on lag time to listen for main points and summarize them for yourself (only when you re-phrase someone else's idea into your own words do you truly understand it).
- Judge ideas, not appearances.
- Take selective notes if appropriate (only the important points).
- Provide feedback (ask questions and give opinions to prompt the next round of the feedback loop).
- Look for areas of interest with the speaker.
- Judge content, not delivery, and avoid premature judgments.
- Listen for ideas and identify the speaker's evidence.
- Be aware of emotions and notice body language as a clue to emotions.
- Keep your mind open; try to access the speaker's world, not your own.

Active listening takes work. There are three Myths about listening:

1. That listening is a natural activity.
2. That hearing and listening are the same thing.
3. That you are speaking to a mass audience.

These are not true. The three truths of listening are:

4. Listening is learned.
5. Telling is not communicating.
6. You speak to one individual at a time, even in large audiences.

## Provide Nonverbal Cues

Your eyes, face, and body send silent messages while you're talking. To really be effective, you need to pay attention to these nonverbal cues. They can be as important as your words.

- **Eye contact:** western cultures tend to value eye contact, but too much of it can appear aggressive.
- **Facial expression:** do you look attentive or bored?
- **Posture and gestures:** do you look alert and active, as though this conversation is important to you, or sleepy and disinterested? It's astonishing how many leaders think it's okay to slouch back in their chair when talking to their reports.
- **Time:** as a leader, one of the most significant things you can give your reports is time. If someone is struggling, and you allocate sufficient time with them to really deal with it, that sends a powerful (nonverbal) message.
- **Territory:** their office or yours? Where you hold a conversation can have a profound effect on how it goes. As a leader, you can change the tone (and often communicate more effectively) by meeting your reports in their offices rather than yours. You can also make a conversation less formal (and more fluent) by meeting in neutral places, such as the cafeteria, for coffee or lunch.

## Cultural Effects on Communication

Communicating with someone from a different culture can present challenges. Cultural values can be compared along five key dimensions:

- Low vs. high context (depends little on context of situation to convey meaning).
- Individualism vs. collectivism (Canada is more collectivist than the United States, less collective than South America or Southern Europe).
- Formality (less emphasis on tradition).
- Communication style (straightforward, polite).
- Time orientation (Time is Money – Time is to be Savoured).

## Tips for Better Oral Communications

- Use straightforward language.
- Speak slowly and enunciate clearly.
- Encourage feedback.
- Check frequently for comprehension by asking questions.
- Observe eye movements.
- Accept blame.

- Listen without interrupting.
- Remember to smile.
- Follow up in writing.
- Avoid ethnocentrism and stereotyping

## **Finis: Key Takeaways**

- Communication is a multistep process that takes effort and skill.
- Audience orientation and active listening are two of the most powerful attitudes that make for a better communicator.
- Follow the three-step process for written communication: prewriting, writing, and revising.
- Good business writing:
  - Emphasizes audience benefits,
  - Uses inclusive language,
  - Uses plain and familiar language, and
  - Uses precise expressions.